

# The Colonized Colonizer: the Japanese Position in a Cross-Cultural World

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## **The Colonized Colonizer: the Japanese Position in a Cross-Cultural World**

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For whom does postcolonial theory exist? Whose voice is it that we hear in the thick readers of postcolonial theory? These are the questions I have been asking myself repeatedly in this decade, observing the critical theory trend that has made the term "postcolonial" fashionable in Japan. The term certainly gave a name to an area of studies inclusive of diverse interests, which previously obliged me to mutter weakly when trying to explain my intention to examine the effects of colonialism in modern literatures, especially those in English, and Japanese. In order to pursue this inevitably trans-cultural research, the concept of national literature, or literature based on cultural nationalism, had to be abandoned. This kind of proposition does not now seem as outlandish as it did ten years ago, and this change owes a lot to many heated discussions on postcolonialism.

However, the quick spread and almost arbitrary usage of the term 'postcolonial' seems to have diffused its historical specificity. Highly theoretical discussions have evolved, mainly in American and British academic institutions, which have served to keep critics and creative writers such as Wilson Harris, Raja Rao, Albert Wendt, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, and Witi Ihimaera, who live not necessarily literally but culturally outside of metropolitan centers, in relative obscurity. These writers are virtually unknown to the majority of Japanese scholars of literature, even though many of them have read the "famous" essays of Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha or Stuart Hall. We must honestly and bitterly admit that "famous" to Japanese academics of foreign literary studies means that those writers are famous in the U.S., France, or Britain. This is not only true of Japan; the Australian scholar Bill Ashcroft and his co-authors, warn:

..."postcolonial theory" may itself mask and even perpetuate unequal economic and cultural relations. This happens when the bulk of the literary theory is seen to come out of the metropolitan centres, "adding value" to the literary "raw material" imported from the postcolonial societies. (Ashcroft et al. 2)

It is not only absurd but also perverse when this process ends by those of us in

Japan importing this product, postcolonialism, making sure that it is manufactured with the guarantee of the metropolitan centers using authentic third world material. It is perverse, first because by doing so we, the students of foreign literatures, disregard our own historical past as a colonizing power that controlled much of the Asia-Pacific region. When we criticize Western imperialism and its cultural effects, we are, or we should be, facing the problems of our own past and our own political/cultural positions. Second, it is absurd to ignore our own past of being a provider of raw materials. Japan has been a resource of exotic stimuli for European artists and theorists, much in the same way as Africa, Tahiti, or Arabia have been.

By importing postcolonialism from metropolitan centers, we Japanese students of literatures in English and other European languages are pretending to be transparent, neutral, and without any specific historical background. Or worse yet, we become "honorary whites," definitely one of the most absurd and perverse of all possible identities in the world, since we are not white, and will never be "honored" by the privilege to despise our own selves. And are these not the very targets of postcolonial critique--objectification of the Other, the honorary whites, the elite among natives (either educated blacks or enlightened yellows)?

Then again, what are postcolonial theories in Japan for? To whom are we applying them? Whose voices are we listening to; who is speaking? I am not going to relegate these recurrent questions on subject, power, and the positionality of intellectuals only to the influential texts and discussions of, for example, Gayatri Spivak, in some sort of pre-established agreement as in many recent articles and essays in Japan on postcolonial literature. No matter how attractive and effective the theories of Spivak or Said or Ashcroft are, we cannot begin the discussion of postcolonialism while ignoring our own positionality, our own particular selves in this specific locality. We must relate our own physical selves, our own society, our own history to the issues of postcolonialism. Otherwise, postcolonialism will lose its significance as a subversive counter-discourse and become another commodity in the market of imported goods, favorites of Japanese traders and consumers of knowledge.

The aim of this paper is to explain why it is necessary to repeat these seemingly obvious matters. First, let me mention an incident that recently happened in my class. In the spring semester of 1998, I assigned some stories by several Anglophone postcolonial writers to undergraduates at Tokyo University. Among the writers I selected were Jean Rhys, a white Creole from the island of Dominica; Archie Weller, an Aboriginal Australian; Albert Wendt, a Samoan; Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian; and Satendra Nandan, an Indo-Fijian. After assigning those works, I asked the students to talk freely about what they read. One of the students, obviously somewhat at a loss,

ventured, "For me, it is difficult to empathize with the works of the oppressed. I feel I can sympathize and better understand writers such as Jean Rhys or Marguerite Duras who thought about colonialism and the colonized even though they belonged to the white ruling class. "

I was astonished, and wanted to ask this student who she thought she was? But at the same time, I could understand her response as a straightforward and perhaps typical one from a member of the elite of Japanese society. She is never questioned about her identity in the streets of Tokyo, never accused of just being there, and certainly that is not her fault. But her lack of imagination and empathy cannot be overlooked, as it does not seem to be something simply attributable to her as an individual, but comes from what we might call the "structural ignorance" in our modern Japanese society.

It is not easy for a person who is obliged to live in a cross-cultural situation to accept one's "hybrid" self and find a positive meaning in his or her multiple, if not schizoid, cultural heritages. The experiences of writers like Meira Chand, whose mother is Swiss and whose father is Indian, strike a sharp contrast to that of that Tokyo University student. Chand, born and brought up in London and of mixed parentage, was aware of her "hybridity" from early in her life, of which she writes vividly about in her short autobiographical piece entitled "Why I Write" (1994).

At the age of four or five, while Meira was playing alone on the beach, a strange Englishman approached her and asked where she was from. Her father, seeing the Englishman from a distance, came rushing over. He shouted at Meira asking her what the man had said. His daughter explained that she told the Englishman she was from India, as she felt "a natural affinity with my [her] father and his country," although she knew nothing about the country. Her father ordered her, "Never tell anyone you are Indian. Say you are English." It was a secret between two black British, kept from Meira's mother. Later in her life Chand reflects:

I understand...knowing his battle for acceptance in a discriminating world, his deeper anxiety as I stood on that beach, dark-eyed, dark-haired, dark-skinned like himself, vulnerable before a world he knew too well and without the tools for survival.... He ordered me to deny him and so to deny a whole half of myself.... (Chand, 298)

Chand wrote her first book in Japan, with a protagonist very similar to herself, a child who suffers from cultural duality and spiritual isolation. It seems that living in Japan with her Indian husband and their children, she came to understand her father's



difficulties as an Indian youth in London of the early 20th century--the difficulties of being an alien, conspicuously different from the rest of society.

The "rest of the society" implies of those like me who are never asked where they are from. We are never pressed to hide, search for, or resume a denied half of ourselves as long as we are safely immersed in the majority that makes up Japanese society. There had never been any call for the undergraduate student to imagine the experiences of the colonized, such as Chand or her father, as she could never conceive of anything like that happening to herself. But actually, it does happen. It happens easily when we are abroad where being a yellow person has negative connotations. This has been my experience as it has that of many others, including Natsume Soseki, and I felt uneasy realizing that the tension or rejection could be caused solely by my physical existence. To the transparent importers of postcolonial theories who forget or ignore their own colour, their own cultural and historical background, and their own position in the world, Meira Chand might be just another object of analysis, a "native informant" of the oppressed members of the society in which she lives. But her experiences in Japan, although not given a full account in her piece, boomerang with my own experiences. I have been, and am, a native informant. And I am hybrid. These statements could carry a different nuance if they were made to an international audience in the United States or Europe, but I want to say it in Japan, especially to Japanese scholars of foreign literature, even though they might sound abrupt or even dangerous when I myself am a comfortably accepted member of this society. I am well aware of the economic and military power of modern Japan, but at the same time I need to state that I am one of those like Chand. This parallelism goes beyond a mere personal empathy or a protest against racism.

Ever since the age of the Great Voyages, European countries competed for islands and continents which they have regarded as 'no-man's' lands or 'no-worthy-man's' lands, and in this century, Imperial Japan followed them. These places continue to experience the difficulties of cross-culturalization after, or regardless of, their political independence. The emigrants from these postcolonial regions carry with them their hybridity that keeps evolving within their host societies. Indeed "Postcolonial theory" has existed for a long time before that particular name was used to describe it (Ashcroft 1), and postcolonial condition also exists far from the actual geographical sites of colonization.

The position of modern Japan in the power relationship and cultural effects of colonialism is a double-sided one: military Japan before 1945 was certainly a colonizing power. However, at the same time, it itself had been culturally colonized--it had, forcibly at times and willingly at other times, incorporated the European

civilization which had overwhelmed it since the Meiji Restoration. Certainly Japan shares with postcolonial societies the historical experiences that Max Dorsinville described as "post-Europeanization." However, dazzled as we are by our power and prosperity that we think makes us first class citizens of the world and separates us from the so-called Third World countries, we fail to see our own "post-Europeanizationality." The Meiji slogan of *Datsua Nyuo* (Escaping Asia and Entering Europe), hardly a new one, elucidates this imperceptiveness. The deception is not only intentional, it has been so since the early stages of modernization.

In the discussions of the cultures and literatures of people colonized by Japan such as Okinawans, Koreans, Taiwanese, and the Ainu, a large number of Japanese scholars now understand that the attitude of the one discussing the matter can be the focus of severe criticism and that postcolonial theories come into play in such discussions. But in the studies of cultures and literatures in English or other European languages, our own bodies, as Japanese writers or speakers, tend to become invisible to us. Almost unconsciously, many of us ignore our post-Europeanized cross-culturality and we glide into the position of honorary whites.

This was the problem of the creative writers of Showa era, too, who grew up reading translations of Western literature and aspired to be 'great', 'authentic' writers like Zola, Dickens, Joyce or Valéry. Two examples of such modern Japanese writers are Nakajima Atsushi and Yokomitsu Riichi. Both visited the colonies of Japan, seriously reflected over the process and results of colonization, and wrote steadily through the war years, although in very different ways.

Nakajima Atsushi worked for nine months in Micronesia as an officer in charge of compiling Japanese textbooks for the Japanese colonial schools in the South Pacific. He found this job virtually meaningless and totally irrelevant at a time when the tide of war was turning against Japan. Nakajima was indifferent to and even indignant about the fanatic military expansionism and assimilation policy of Imperial Japan, although he could not express his feelings overtly due to censorship.

However, this does not mean that Nakajima was free from colonial fantasies. He had always had a taste for exotic stories, especially those in tropical settings. His interest in R. L. Stevenson must have been born from this enthusiasm. Before he left Tokyo to assume his duties in Palau, Nakajima had written "*Tusitala no shi*" (*The Death of Tusitala*), a work later renamed and published as "*Hikari to kaze to yume*" (*Light, Wind and Dreams*, 1942). This story can be read either as an adapted journal of Stevenson in Samoa, or a novella with Stevenson as the protagonist. In the course of the story a dramatized version of Stevenson's diary alternates with commentary written in the style of a literary biography. Stevenson's friendship with the Samoans as well as

his critical attitude toward the English colonizers in Samoa reflects Nakajima's own beliefs. There is no doubt he identifies with Stevenson. Nakajima ends the story with the death of "Tusitala," a narrator of stories, which was Stevenson's title among the Samoans. Nakajima describes one of the old chiefs shedding tears over the corpse of Stevenson "with a desperate lament over death felt so much more because of his intoxication with the joy of life, befitting a man of the South...and he murmured softly, 'Tofa (sleep), tusitala!' " (Nakajima, 1:288)

Thus Stevenson, a European novelist, ends his life surrounded by the islanders who love him and accept him as one who narrates their stories--of them, for them. This idealistic, idyllic image of the South Seas and perhaps of himself were broken when Nakajima saw the island of Koror full of Japanese in 1941 and found it to be a second-hand copy of the civilized world. The cross-culturalization of Japan's South Pacific colonies was nothing but the disappointing deterioration of "genuine culture" in the eyes of this Japanese writer. He loved the least developed island of Jaluit because it was "closest to the South Pacific of Stevenson." (Nakajima, 3: 636)

In "Mariyan,"(1942) a short sketch of life in Koror and of a Palauan woman called Mariyan, Nakajima's attitude towards cross-culturalization is more obvious. Mariyan is fluent in Japanese and in English. She sometimes dresses in white Western clothes with an umbrella and was educated in Naichi (the main islands of Japan). She reads Japanese translations of English poetry, and of *Le mariage de Loti* by Pierre Loti, a work of which she is critical. She is a typical colonial elite, and her intellectual background is very similar to that of Nakajima himself, or to other young Japanese intellectuals in those days. However, Nakajima sees Mariyan, not as his ally, but as a somewhat pitiful existence, the embodiment of the cultural confusion of a colonized society.

Nakajima is not unaware of his own "messy hybridity." (Nakajima, 1:400) In a fragmentary essay titled "Mahiru" (Midday, 1942), Nakajima confesses his confused values, analyzing his own view of the South Pacific. He says to himself, "You are not even looking at the islanders. What you see is merely a copy of Gauguin. It is not even Micronesia that you are looking at. You are looking at the faded reproduction of Polynesia portrayed by Loti and Melville." (Nakajima, 1:399)

Mark Peattie writes in his study of the imperial Japanese in Micronesia; "Even sensitive Japanese observers like Nakajima Atsushi brought to their observations of Micronesian life certain judgments which, though sympathetically expressed, are oddly jarring today." (Peattie, 218) Surely, many will agree today that Nakajima's patronizing attitude towards Mariyan is "oddly jarring." However, I am not so sure they will also agree on the similarity between Mariyan and Nakajima. And that is what I want to

emphasize. Nakajima is a Japanese Mariyan, and he failed to see this. He sees himself as a Stevenson, a benefactor of the Pacific islanders. But Rarahu, an island girl in *Le mariage de Loti*, is nothing but a Tahitian Madame Chrysanthème. Tahitians and Japanese were not much different to the eyes of the European writers who wrote of exotic voyages. Nakajima sees Micronesia through Loti, and Mariyan reads Loti and English poetry in Japanese translation. Only Mariyan doubts the credibility of Loti's description of Polynesian society. This failure to recognize the similarity between a modern Japanese intellectual and a colonial elite was fatal, for this is the very cause of what may be called the "honorary whiteness" of Japanese intellectuals who differentiate between themselves and the other Asia-Pacific peoples.

In the novel *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1979) by Samoan writer Albert Wendt, the most famous and prolific contemporary writer and critic of the South Pacific, there is another young man who identifies himself with R. L. Stevenson. The novel is a chronicle of several generations of an *aiga* (chief) family in Samoa from the 1930s to the 1960s. The story depicts modern Samoa struggling at a time of rapid change--change from a traditional village economy to a monetary-based economy, from belief in mythical gods to Christianity. How to survive in this cross-cultural situation is the problem of the second generation in the throes of modernization, which is represented in the novel by Pepe: He is the son of Tauliopepe, the strongest chief eagerly promoting modernization. Pepe is a sensitive, proud, and fiercely rebellious young man, caught between the worlds of the ancestors he learned from a tribal elder he respects, and the "coca-cola culture" rushing in through the followers of Western civilization like his father. He attempts to go back to the pre-European tradition but this proves to be a feat already impossible for a Samoan youth in the 1950s. He ends his life as a social failure in a hospital in the growing capital of Apia. There he first tries to write poetry, then a novel, with the little strength left in him and he thinks of Stevenson, looking up the mountains from the window of the ward:

Further up the range, Robert Louis Stevenson is buried. (If my novel is as good as Stevenson's *Treasure Island* I will be satisfied.)...I could not finish a three-line masterpiece, one line for every month in hospital, so I decided to become the second Robert Louis Stevenson, a tusitala or teller of tales, but with a big difference. *I want to write a novel about me.* (Wendt, 157. Author's emphasis)

In this monologue half of self-mockery, half of manifestation as a writer, we find a surprising closeness and an explicit point of departure between the two writers,

Nakajima and Wendt. Both admire Stevenson, aspire to be writers or *tusitalas* as Stevenson, both eagerly read Western literatures, although both are aware of other traditions rooted deeply within themselves and in their cultures: Nakajima reads Chinese and Japanese classics, Wendt and Pepe recite Samoan mythology. These cross-cultural backgrounds confuse them at the same time enrich them. But while Nakajima wrote as Stevenson and kept thinking over his cultural ambiguity negatively, Pepe claims that he is different from Stevenson because he is going to write about himself, not about Stevenson. And what Pepe tries to do is precisely what Albert Wendt has been doing. Wendt claims here, through Pepe, that he is going to be a postcolonial writer, appropriating the language and the literary tradition of Anglo-America and Europe, but writing about himself and his own island, taking them back from the hands of Stevenson and Melville and Margaret Mead. He grabs at any chance, any tool, to speak against these colonial discourses in order to regain the voice of his people, which raise out of their "messy hybridity."

Mariyan's criticism of Loti can be regarded as the same sort of attempt made by Wendt: Although she reads Loti in Japanese and expresses her doubts in the language of the colonizer, her opinion echoes that of a postcolonial critic, not a colonial elite. Although Nakajima was conscious of Mariyan's protest against Eurocentric view of the Pacific Islanders, he lacked insight into how it might develop into the strategic counter-discourse of a writer like Wendt, in which he may have found a way to handle his own cultural dilemma.

Some may feel comfortable that Nakajima is not an exception, wondering whether Japanese writers have really faced the problem of writing about themselves, as is the case with such postcolonial writers as Wendt. We were never politically or militarily colonized and never deprived of our own language. Yet, for Japanese writers of the early Showaera, the sense of the loss of their "genuine tradition" was serious. Kobayashi Hideo, Hagiwara Sakuraro and many other writers lamented their "messy hybridity" and some maintained that they should regain their "cultural purity." Yokomitsu Riichi, one of the most prominent leaders of Japanese literature at the time, was one of them. His most famous, or rather, infamous novel *Ryoshu* (*A Traveler's Sadness*, 1937-46) was written during the Second World War. The protagonist, a young Japanese named Yashiro, visits France in the middle of the 1930s and finds its culture hopelessly alien--a shock to him as he is from the supposedly Europeanized and modern Japan.

Throughout this long story full of monologues and discussions, there is an antagonism between Japan and the West. Yashiro, the "Japanist" and Kuji, the "Europeanist" have heated debates about whether European, that is, "universal," culture

and thought can be grafted onto or integrated into Japanese, that is, "traditional" culture and thought. They grope for an answer to the question of where the Showa intellectuals should find their cultural and spiritual home in the aftermath of the sweeping effects of modernization and Europeanization.

Today, we are doubtful of the very premises from which those debates arise. After all, who decides what is universal? Is there any culture that is genuinely "traditional" or "pure"? However, the issue of Japan *vis-à-vis* the West persists when we consider the cultural hybridity of modern Japan. In the case of Yashiro, he finds ardent nationalism as the only breakthrough to his cultural ambiguity, convincing himself that it is the duty of the modernized Japanese elite to go back and purify themselves in the "true Japanese tradition." This was the path the talented writer Yokomitsu himself followed. In striking contrast to the high acclaim enjoyed after the war by his closest friend and rival Kawabata Yasunari (before and during the war they were always called "Yokomitsu and Kawabata," not the other way around), Yokomitsu was accused of supporting the war effort in postwar Japan.

What Yashiro calls "tradition" in *Ryoshu* is closer to being an invention than to historically accumulated cultural practices. Yashiro is anguished because he thinks he cannot marry Chizuko who is Catholic; he gravely remembers the history of his ancestors in Kyushu who were defeated by a Christian daimyo (feudal lord), thus making their pedigree obscure. But Yashiro's interest in Shinto has developed after he returned to Japan from Europe, and he originally did not have anything against Christianity; rather, he was indifferent to it. His anguish came as an afterthought. He frantically urges Chizuko to abandon her beliefs, which eventually she does, and strangely, without any trace of distress on her part. Yashiro (and Yokomitsu himself) is not unaware of the absurdity of his efforts to regain or create a genuine Japanese tradition. "Modern man can never be so happy as to be truly satisfied," (Yokomitsu, 8:622) Yashiro says. He goes on to think, "In confronting western attitudes, even our minds and souls have changed to the western style. Ours is the generation of the youth who have no homeland in which to settle; there is only the deepening sadness of a traveler drifting." (Yokomitsu, 8:501) Yokomitsu regards cultural hybridity as a source of confusion, but cannot find a way to overcome it and he desperately yearns for a monolithic entity called genuine, pure, modern Japan.

When I read *The Serpent and the Rope*, an autobiographical novel by the Indian author Raja Rao, I was struck by the story, realizing that it had so much in common with *Ryoshu*. The protagonist Rama shares with Yashiro the same problem of religion and marriage. Rama's wife Madeleine is a French woman who believes in and is studying Buddhism under the influence of her husband. As is the case in *Ryoshu*, the



novel consists of many discussions, metaphysical contemplations, diary entries, and monologues on the part of the protagonist. Repeatedly, Rama praises the beauty of India, as Yashiro does in regard to Japan after his return from Europe. The theme of the novel is India, and its relations with Europe. Rama himself is a scholar of religions: his hypothesis is that in the origin of Catharism, there is the influence of Jainism or Buddhism. In other words, Rama tries to reproduce the marriage of the ancient civilization of India with that of the younger Europe. Despite these efforts however, his marriage fails. Madelaine has a mental breakdown after the death of their young children, then eventually finds it impossible to be a true Buddhist, or a true Indian, and to live up to her husband's philosophy and expectations. This does not change Rama, though. Rama keeps saying, as the author Raja Rao does, that he is a Brahmin, an Indian, and a traditionalist. Rao/Rama never yields to French, English or American cultures although he has been in those places longer than he has been in India.

However, Rao/Rama knows that his India is not the India which exists in historical time and geographical space. He says its an idea, a concept, "and this India is in all," (Rao, 1996, 18) omnipresent. For Rama, "India is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea, a metaphysic. ...I was born an exile, and I could continue to be one. My India I carried wheresoever I went." (Rao, 1960, 381-2)

Both Yashiro's sadness as a traveler and Rama's recognition of himself as an exile derive from their homelands' and their own cultural hybridity. Both writers lament the degeneration of cultures, declaring that they are going to stand on their fort of pure tradition, which is close enough to a fabrication. In fact they both read Dostevsky, Valéry, Baudelaire and many other European writers and frequently cite them in their writings-- Yokomitsu in translation, Rao in the original. But there is a difference between Yokomitsu and Rao: Yokomitsu tries to make himself believe in the actual existence or possibility of the fabrication of a contemporary, pure Japanese tradition, while Rao cannot deceive himself into the fantasy that his India has any place in this material world. Rao, who has to write in English despite his almost arrogant claim that English is only one of the Indo-European languages, is a postcolonial writer: he was educated in France, has a broad knowledge of European and English literatures, inevitably uses his oppressor's tool to assert the Indian side of himself, and is well aware of these contradictions in his manifested "pure" Indian self. His strong assertion of the Indian identity is an effective counter-discursive strategy, enabling him to present a very different view of the world. In short, Rao had to accept cross-culturalism in his colonized homeland, while Yokomitsu kept struggling to find a way out of hybridity.

By presenting a parallelism between two postcolonial writers and modern Japanese writers, I have tried to find a viewpoint that enables us to understand why so

many Showa intellectuals failed to realize and relativize their position in the world, why so often they failed to see their arrogance in their relations to the colonies of Japan, and how we may overcome this negative heritage, which I think still has a hold on many of us. In other words, we need to analyze the ambiguity of Japan as a colonized colonizer in order to find our positions in the cross-cultural world. All our conscientious contemplation on the ethics of the analysis and studies of Other will otherwise become irrelevant.

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